

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Lawrence Di Rita
June 27, 2002

Goldberg: This is an interview with Lawrence Di Rita, Special Assistant to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, held in the Pentagon on June 27, 2002 at 1:30 p.m. Interviewers are Alfred Goldberg and Stuart Rochester.

Mr. Di Rita, had you been briefed in any way about the possibility of a terrorist attack on the Pentagon and how it might be handled?

Di Rita: Prior to this attack?

Goldberg: Yes, prior to September 11th.

Di Rita: There had been general discussions about terrorist threats, and perhaps even as far as that, more specific discussions about our abilities—threat conditions and things of that nature—but nothing specific and certainly nothing as it actually occurred.

Goldberg: You were with Legislative Affairs for a while?

Di Rita: I was there.

Goldberg: Did you hear anything about it at that time?

Di Rita: I may have. I just don't have a specific recollection.

Goldberg: Was there a disaster evacuation plan that involved this office that you were aware of?

Di Rita: I'm aware after-the-fact that there is a general plan for the Pentagon, but I don't think I had specific awareness of that beforehand.

Rochester: That's in regard to the secretary and his senior staff?

Di Rita: Again, I had a general awareness that there were things on the shelf that people do in the case of catastrophic circumstances. It wasn't that we had worked through any kind of routine that would occur under certain circumstances.

Goldberg: So, you weren't particularly aware that you had responsibilities in that connection?

Di Rita: Frankly, I probably have responsibilities in that connection. But I wasn't aware. I know that we have senior enlisted folks here who pay a lot of attention to that because it's their job.

Goldberg: With reference to September 11th specifically, which is where we will be focusing a lot of our attention, where were you and when did you learn that the plane had hit the Building?

Di Rita: When the plane hit the Building I was already over in the Executive Support Center which is across the third floor by the D-ring.

Goldberg: How is it that you were there?

Di Rita: Because the planes had already hit the World Trade Center. When the first plane hit the World Trade Center I think I was here in my office. Perhaps, I was in one of the other offices within the suite. When the second plane hit, I know I was here because I was watching television. By then, I went and saw the secretary. We talked for a while.

Goldberg: After the second plane hit, you talked with the secretary.

Di Rita: I did. Then I asked that a number of people gather in the Executive Support Center.

Goldberg: Who else was there?

Di Rita: To the best of my recollection, Legislative Affairs, Public Affairs, General Counsel, [Stephen] Cambone and there may have been a handful of others.

Goldberg: Not the secretary?

Di Rita: No.

Di Rita: I asked everybody to get together over there at a certain time. I think it might have been 9:15 a.m.

Goldberg: It wasn't that far from the impact area.

Di Rita: It's in the D-ring on this floor between Corridors 8 and 9.

Rochester: At that point was there a reason to expect a larger threat specific to the Pentagon?

Di Rita: I don't know that I thought about that. As I recall there were some TV reports that something had happened at the State Department. If it wasn't at the exact same time it was breaking news about a car bomb at the State Department. We were in the Executive Support Center talking through things like "What next? Should we think about the force conditions/threat conditions?" The things that people think about in circumstances like that. We were in there when the plane hit the Pentagon.

Goldberg: You heard the crash?

Di Rita: We heard and felt it, and everybody stopped what they were doing. As I recall, we were sitting around the conference table.

Goldberg: What did you think?

Di Rita: I remember saying, "That's us." I had no idea what. Having heard about the car bomb at the State Department, I thought that it might be a truck bomb. I

had no concept. They were starting to show certain vantage points from various cameras in Washington with something that appeared to be behind the White House on fire. But I think, in hindsight, it was actually the Pentagon from a certain perspective that made it look like something closer to the White House.

Goldberg: It had to be.

Di Rita: As it turns out nothing else was hit.

Goldberg: After the plane crashed what did you do?

Di Rita: We continued talking through—again, I don't think any of us knew what it was. We knew that something had happened here, but we were still focused on what we did know—that two planes hit the World Trade Center. We were getting a lot of information coming in—this is right at the National Military Command Center. We had the watch team. There was a lot of chatter. The phones were ringing. I remember having a couple of conversations with people at the White House.

Goldberg: Who told you about the plane crash?

Di Rita: I think I probably found out after a long period of time—several hours. I went to Site R with the Deputy, because the Executive Support Center/NMCC started to fill up with smoke after a few hours. I'm sure they will talk to you about this. We started to make plans to be able to continue our operations somewhere else. I'm not sure that even then that I knew that a plane had hit our Building. I just knew that something had happened. We knew that there was some incident. The secretary had gone out to the crash site, but he did not come in talking about

that. He came in to go to work. He was on the phone with the vice president and the president a couple of times about the combat air patrols.

Goldberg: You didn't go to the Site R?

Di Rita: I did. Wolfowitz's assistant was out of town. He needed to go over there and get it going.

Goldberg: Did you come back with him? You came back to the Building?

Di Rita: Yes.

Goldberg: What did you do during that time?

Di Rita: We spent that whole period of time in the morning in the National Military Command Center with the secretary and the vice chairman. There was a lot of activity. Then we went back up to the Executive Support Center, and there were video tele-conferences with the White House and a few other places. At that time, we decided that we didn't know how much time we had here because it was beginning to get smoky and crummy. Wolfowitz and I left. There were a number of deputy committee meetings that we participated in via secure video tele-conferences. They were already starting to think through, "Now what?" There was a lot of discussion about al Qaeda. It was general understanding that this was a major terrorist incident.

Goldberg: You didn't think that OSD facilities are very good.

Di Rita: They had been long ignored.

Goldberg: The military had a much better set-up.

Di Rita: The NMCC wasn't that great. Subsequently, we have spent some effort to get it a little bit more useable should something like that ever be needed.

Goldberg: When did you visit the crash site?

Di Rita: That night. When we came back, we landed out there. Of course that is the Heliport. So they landed on that traffic circle or somewhere near there. We had to walk back to the River Entrance. In so doing, we stopped at the crash site and observed.

Rochester: Did you have any friends or co-workers who were missing?

Di Rita: I had three very good friends who were missing. Throughout the course of the day, when the thought occurred to me, I tried to contact them. Of course, the whole Metro area was not contactable. I had talked to my wife about doing her best to see if she could find them throughout the course of the day. Over time, we were finally able to get through to them.

Rochester: You were able to locate them?

Di Rita: Yes.

Rochester: Were there any casualties among your co-workers?

Di Rita: Nobody here. There were people that I knew. I used to be in the Navy so, I knew a lot of those folks. I knew a handful who were killed. We had a very good friend who was on the plane coming from Dulles—Barbara Olson.

Goldberg: Well, obviously a great deal had to be done in the way of rescue operations, planning and all of the rest. Were you involved in any of the discussions with the people who were doing all of this?

Di Rita: Which operation are you talking about?

Goldberg: I'm talking about the fire fighting and the rescue efforts early that day.

Di Rita: To some extent we were involved because while we were in the National Military Command Center there was a lot of interaction with the Director of Military Support as to what were the circumstances in the Pentagon, and what was the crisis response activity that the military was involved in New York and here.

Goldberg: Were other people in that Center aware that there had been a plane crash?

Di Rita: The secretary certainly was.

Goldberg: I'm talking about the people who were with you.

Di Rita: At some point along the way, I suppose everybody learned it. It was never a point of discussion among the group I was with. It took me a while. I'm not sure when, but sometime during that day I finally connected the dots and realized that that was what had happened.

Goldberg: That proves how big this Building is.

Di Rita: We definitely felt it. The idea of planes flying into buildings is so incredible that I didn't think that there was a third one of those.

Goldberg: There were people elsewhere in the Building who didn't know it at all—the people in the cafeteria, for instance.

Di Rita: I believe it.

Goldberg: What particularly stands out in your mind during those first few days?

Di Rita: I'll be honest with you, one of the things that stand out in my mind is the regularity that we got back to so quickly—how quickly we were able to snap back into place and get back to work. Part of it, I'm sure, is because in this part of the

Building we weren't physically affected. Even so, this Building is a lot more than the structure, it's the people coming and going and that just seems to come back very fast. The secretary was very clear that he wanted people back to work the next day.

Goldberg: I don't know but that it was the right thing to do—the healthy thing to do.

Di Rita: I think that's probably true. People just got right back at it. The other thing that struck me was how clear a sense the Wolfowitz-Hadley gang—the deputy's committee and the boss—had of what this was when they had a chance to talk about it, which was fairly early on. As I said, they got involved in a video tele-conference within a few hours of us being in Site R. When I look at the notes of the video tele-conference, it is remarkable to me how much they started to piece together in so short a period of time—what it was and what the likely responses needed to be. Not so much, "We've got to go to war in Afghanistan," but "this is very likely al Qaeda." It was quite impressive the degree to which these decision-makers/policy-makers had a sense of it. And also the resolve—everybody was operating with a clear sense that we had to respond in a very dramatic way—that this was not something that could be handled any other way. That came right from the top. One got the impression that's exactly the way, when you heard the president talking about it, that that just permeated right down.

Goldberg: After the attack did you play a role in the thinking and planning that was going on about how to handle things?

Di Rita: In terms of the policy response or in terms of institutional responsibilities?

Goldberg: The institutional response and the policy response.

Di Rita: I'm in observance of most policy that gets made around here in the way all staff assistants play a part. I don't pretend to be a policy maker, but I do my part. I do hear things and I offer my advice when my advice is sought. On the other part it, I was very involved in helping think through reacting to what we learned about our ability to conduct operations when the Pentagon is disabled. We put together a task force to fix Site R and to provide other alternatives—means of command and control. I was rather involved in that.

Goldberg: How about the Building itself?

Di Rita: Early on I was somewhat involved because it had to do with what we did to fix our alternative sites—in addressing the weaknesses and the flaws of years of disrepair. We took the opportunity to think through what we might want to do with respect to accelerating some of the things that were already planned through the Pentagon Renovation. But that might be more necessary now in terms of the ability to have transparent network switching and that sort of thing. So we, to some extent, got involved early on in doing an assessment of where those activities were going during the Pentagon Renovation process and deciding whether there are any that we want to accelerate.

Goldberg: The secretary is just the person to handle that.

Di Rita: Less so. The secretary was immediately involved in focusing on the national response to the attack. The deputy was somewhat more involved in the

follow-up on some of the command and control issues, and also developing the budget that we thought we were going to need. Literally, on the helicopter ride back from Site R, he and I were doing rough sketches of what we thought we were going to need to prosecute a war in terms of the budget.

Rochester: Any thought to relocating the secretary's offices—the headquarters staff in the Building—in further consideration of the renovation?

Di Rita: I would say that there has been some talk about, "Is the way that we are organized the most sensible way?" It isn't so much just from a force protection standpoint, but also from a functional standpoint. The renovation as well as the experiences from the 11th have been good impetus to really think through that—and we are thinking through that. It is more than just—well you can kill a bunch of decision-makers if you move them away from the E-ring. It's a lot more than that: Functionally, is the way the place is cut up sensible?

Goldberg: Didn't the Renovation people make some recommendations about changes?

Di Rita: They have been involved. They had some concepts as part of the renovation and they have been involved, as we have been thinking it through.

Goldberg: Didn't they brief the secretary on these?

Di Rita: I think there have been a couple of briefings in which he has been involved, but there have not been decisions.

Goldberg: Didn't they make some recommendations about relocating?

Di Rita: Yes, they have made a few. I have been involved in a couple of briefs in which the secretary has been involved. Lee [Evey] and others have come in

with, "Here is one way to think about it." Lee's concept has been more focused on protection issues—safety issues. The secretary wants to think about it in a slightly bigger fashion. Not so much—just spread them out over the E-ring because it's safer. But does it make sense that the (this is my example) chief of acquisition is across the hall from the secretary, but the Joint Chiefs of Staff is downstairs and around the corner. In other words—let's think about this in a more functional way—it is the way the Building is divided. It's a lot more than just physical force protection issues. Those are important and they will be a factor, of course. I would not say that the secretary rejected Lee's proposal. He sent us all back to think about it in a different way.

Goldberg: Did anything come of that thinking?

Di Rita: We are still working and thinking about it. We have had different proposals that we have washed around. It is a work in progress.

Goldberg: It takes time to get things done.

Di Rita: Yes, but also, when you are looking at something differently than anybody has looked at it—there is a lot of momentum behind everything around here. Even the things that you get done take a long time, but once you develop a head of steam behind them, it is very hard to think about them differently. What the secretary has done is said, "Look, I know there has been a lot of thinking in one direction, but what I'm looking for is something a little different." I think Lee is a very thoughtful fellow and he has done a very good job. I think the secretary's view is, looking down on the top of the Pentagon, would anybody think in twenty years that what we decided on is sensible from a functional

perspective the way the institution operates. Does it make sense to have wedges that are basically service-specific without any kind of connectivity?

Goldberg: He has been involved in this primarily as an observer.

Di Rita: As an observer and in some of these things a little bit more as a doer in a sense that the secretary makes a general concept—gives general guidance—and it needs a little bit of help moving forward.

Rochester: Was there any evidence that the secretariat part of the Building was targeted by the terrorists? There was some talk that because of the flight path they had to settle for the other side of the Building, which did not have the key E-ring offices. Was there any evidence of that?

Di Rita: I'm not aware of any. I've heard the talk. I don't know how anybody can substantiate that.

Rochester: Were your communications adequate during that early post-attack period?

Di Rita: I think they were. Obviously, the moment when they were stretched the most was on September 11th and the secretary had good communications with the people he needed to talk to. He had several conversations with the president and the vice president. Of course, the vice chairman was right there with him to the extent that they needed to reach out.

Goldberg: The chairman was on his way back.

Di Rita: As I recall, yes. He was overseas. He got back that evening. Yes, I think he had pretty good connections, and when we were at Site R, we had pretty good communications.

Goldberg: Well, one of the major outcomes, of course, has been all of the planning for homeland security.

Di Rita: Sure.

Goldberg: The general picture as distinguished from the Pentagon and DoD itself. Have you been involved in any of the thinking or planning on that?

Di Rita: Yes, quite a bit. Less so the Department of Homeland Security because it doesn't really affect us in a direct way, but internally, yes, a great deal.

Goldberg: That got underway very quickly after September 11th?

Di Rita: Let me say this. It got accelerated very quickly after September 11th. We had already begun talking about it. Just two weeks prior we published the Quadrennial Defense Review, and in it, it was asserted that homeland defense is the most important priority in Department of Defense in defending the United States. We had already begun the unified command plan review. The unified command plan had some objectives of determining whether we were organized in the most appropriate way for this particular type of activity. So, there had already been some good work begun and without question we accelerated our thinking after September 11th.

Goldberg: And that must have happened very quickly.

Di Rita: Yes, no question.

Goldberg: Were there any other changes that affected the way the Department operated?

Di Rita: As a result of this?

Goldberg: Yes.

Di Rita: There certainly has been given a particular sense of urgency to the way we approach every problem. The secretary posed the question early on, "Think about the next one, and put yourself a point beyond the next event—and think back what you wish you had done—now, knowing with certainty there will be another event." That has helped to provide a little bit of perspective on how to look at things and with varying degrees of success. I qualify that significantly because of the inertia you talked about before. There has been a real attempt to stoke a little bit more urgency behind everything we do and rethink everything we do in the Pentagon. The secretary has a clear view that now is the time to get the hard stuff done. Now is the time to really take a bite into doing the things that everybody says that can't be done. A very specific example is the Pentagon Force Protection Agency and the upgrading of the Federal Civil Service level of recruits for the police force in the Pentagon. It's done. Early on I remember having a meeting with Doc and Chief Jester and we were talking about what should we be asking for from the Hill. We are going to be going up with a lot of money. Is there anything we need? Jester or somebody said, "Well, we've been trying to get the DPS folks upgraded so we can compete more evenly." I said, "Let's do it—let's try." We all agreed to try, and sure enough the Congress passed it last year. That's a very specific example. We took advantage of the opportunity.

Goldberg: The federal marshals

Di Rita: Of course, and also the Capitol and Park police. They are all higher grades. Chief Jester said that had been something that they had been trying to

get done for a while and nobody saw the sense of urgency. But obviously, after September 11th, everybody saw that if you've got to recruit a police force for the Pentagon, you sure want it to be as good as you can get. Of course, we've got all of the military kids out there now.

Goldberg: Have there been any other institutional changes here?

Di Rita: I think we have talked about homeland defense and how we structure ourselves there. The pending merger of Space Command and Strategic Command is one ancillary fallout—we've got to rethink the way we organize for the future.

Goldberg: So, we have a staff within OSD now, which is planning.

Di Rita: Yes, and with the Joint Staff.

Goldberg: Isn't there a group in Policy?

Di Rita: There is a group in Policy that works on the war on terrorism.

Goldberg: Is that the one under Verga?

Di Rita: That's homeland defense. Verga does that.

Goldberg: There is another one.

Di Rita: There is a policy group—a coordinating body. Feith and Pace co-chair a coordinating effort to make sure that we are looking around the next corner—or at least try to do that.

Goldberg: Verga is in Policy, too.

Di Rita: Verga's in Policy working homeland defense issues.

Goldberg: There are two groups in Policy.

Di Rita: Yes, there are more I'm sure, because there is a counter-terrorism group that does work within the SOLIC agency.

Goldberg: They should have been doing that all along.

Di Rita: They have been.

Goldberg: Have they appointed an assistant secretary?

Di Rita: Not yet. We have identified a candidate who is under consideration at the White House, but there has not been a nomination.

Goldberg: It's a long time.

Di Rita: We had just gotten close to nominating somebody for the SOLIC position when this happened. We decided to hold off because we might want to rethink how we do this. That is when the secretary asked Secretary White to be the executive agent for homeland defense and let him think it through with all of the authority that goes with an executive agent.

Goldberg: Can you think of anything that we should have asked you?

Di Rita: If you are going to talk to the secretary, he will not want to focus as much on the "hour-by-hour—what did you do and when did you do it."

Goldberg: We want some of that from him.

Di Rita: You can get some of that from him, but I suggest that you get a little of that from Ed Giambastiani.

Goldberg: Was he with the secretary at that time?

Di Rita: Yes.

Goldberg: He went with him to the site?

Di Rita: I don't think Ed went out there with him. You can get all of that from the secretary. The questions that you are asking regarding the institutional changes, he likes that. I think he would rather talk about that rather than "What did you do at 11:15?"

Rochester: It is interesting to the extent September 11th reinforced strategic priorities and budget priorities that the secretary already had or to the extent where it had become a major distraction, and perhaps in some cases, even undercut or forced fundamental rethinking of the direction that Rumsfeld was going prior to September 11th.

Di Rita: Like what?

Rochester: Something like missile defense, for example—whether that has somehow perhaps been put on the back burner to some extent compared to the immediacy of the other priorities.

Goldberg: Or the opposite?

Di Rita: I don't think anybody here feels like it has been put on the back burner—to the contrary. We pulled out of the ABM Treaty and we have really accelerated the budget for that to really starting thinking through research and development. What I'm concerned about—and I don't think I'm the only one: Are we capturing enough with our missile defense program? There has been too much focus on ballistic missiles and there are so many more opportunities to get missiles launched at us that aren't ballistic. We're going great guns on that. There is no question that if the terrorists had missiles they would use them.

Rochester: The question has been raised in the current budget that we need to pay more attention to the mundane threat.

Di Rita: You've got to do it all. It's all about balancing priorities and risks.

Goldberg: It certainly will be costing us a lot of money over a long period of time. This is an incredible cost over a long period. It's a shifting of resources.

Di Rita: It is a shifting of resources. It is a shifting of priorities which is what budgets are.

Goldberg: Defense is only part of that. It's a global matter for us.

Di Rita: Without question.

Goldberg: Mostly for us.

Di Rita: It is very true. It would be much healthier to get to a higher level than we are now, but to a steady level of defense spending, than it would be to do the kind of peaks and valleys that we have done over the years during war and peace—when you look at the total costs of defense.

Goldberg: That's fine—if you can convince Congress.

Di Rita: The big challenge is keeping that sense of urgency.

Goldberg: This is what used to drive the Soviets up the walls. They never knew where we were going.

Di Rita: Exactly.

Goldberg: It is not easy to do. It is our system. We are going to have irregularities all of the time.

Goldberg: Are there any other questions Stuart?

Rochester: No.

Di Rita: I hope this is somewhat helpful.